

TOWARDS A THEORY OF PARENTING: Recycling Self-Discovery

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Over the past few months I have written and posted two articles on my personal website <http://users.eastlink.ca/~roberthenman/> responding to a request to provide a lecture series on parenting. The first article, "Parenting in the 21st Century: Respecting History and Global Culture" attempted to outline the cultural context that permeates the activity of parenting and family life. It was an effort to help both parents and researchers appreciate the larger problem. The second article, "Parents Becoming Better Parents: Strategies of Self-Development" was an effort to provide a process of development for parents and adults in general. Both of these topics will be part of that series of lectures. Both these efforts need be part of a sincere effort to reorient the disorientation of contemporary family life and society. There is though a far greater need for a long term strategy of developing a proper theory of parenting. This article will be directed more towards researchers, therapists, counselors, psychologists, and teachers working in the area of child studies, family life, gerontology, and parenting. To this task I now turn.

In order to set the stage in support of the need for a proper theory of parenting it is necessary to point out some of the deficiencies in present research. Thomas Roberts, in his *A Systems Perspective of Parenting: The Individual, the Family, and the Social Network*¹, develops a theory of parenting that he names a systems perspective. He compares his method to various methods such as Parent effectiveness Training(PET), Adlerian Parent Education, and Behavioral Parenting. What is the focus of these methods? Their focus is to assist families in handling problems and/or in educating the family members to develop as a family unit to eliminate the causes of the problems that have been emerging. Systems theory attempts to add the notion of context. Robert's notion of the systems perspective is that the individuals within a family unit function within a total ecosystem that affects the behaviour of three autonomous and

¹ Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., CA, 1994.

interdependent subsystems; the individual, the family, and the social network. Roberts considers child behaviour problems as the outcome of the interaction of these subsystems.²

Roberts' context is limited. The proper context is far more complex.³ The limited context of Robert's proposal does not take into account that the problems experienced by families and individuals are globally, and historically systemic. In other words the process Roberts offers may assist some families or family groupings in working through some of their problems but the present state of disorientation is ever present to the human experience of living. The problem relates to appreciating the historical context. By that I mean that we are in a stage of cultural fragmentation. That fragmentation is rooted not just in the breakdown of child (compact) consciousness but also in the truncated empiricism of social theory. The data of child studies or parenting is the datum of the researcher. What is a child and what am I as researcher in parenting? I mean that we are operating unknowingly out of an accepted disorientation of ourselves.⁴ In this stage of history we are unknown subjects both to ourselves and others. It is worth quoting a comment of Lonergan's on this point. *The neglected subject does not know him (her) self. The truncated subject not only does not know him(her)self but also is unaware of his(her)ignorance and so, in one way or another, concludes that what he(she) does not know does not exist.*⁵ It is to this larger context and absence of self-knowledge that Roberts' method does not advert. It is within this context that I attempt to outline some pointers towards a proper theory of parenting.

A secondary focus of many researchers is to social policy. Many sociologists focus on the revision of social policy in an attempt to initiate change in communal environment. The outcome is to provide better political, economic, and social contexts

² Ibid., p. xv

³ See my article "Parenting in the 21st century". See also Philip McShane, "Reinventing History", www.philipmcshane.ca for a discussion of the larger context and need for a gradual recycling of self-discovery components through a method of functional specialization.

⁴ The issue of disorientation during this stage of history is discussed in my "How to grow a Child" articles. For a more detailed discussion see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Darton Longman & Todd, Gr, Br., 1972, p. 54-55 on the spread of decline. See also Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, CWL 3, University of Toronto Press, 1992, chapter 7, section 8.1 & 8.2 on general bias and decline.

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, Westminster Press, Penn., 1974, p. 73. Brackets my own.

for the functioning of family life.⁶ The ground of decisions of revision in social policy is motivated by problems, orchestrated by statistical studies, and implemented in the absence of knowledge of the basic empirical source of just what a decision is. Social theory operates towards developing *realist views in which theory is adjusted to practice and practice means whatever happens to be done.*⁷ The alienation of developing practical solutions to social life from its empirical base also relates to the above quotation on the truncated subject. This absence of advertence to the proper data for analysis of contemporary research into family life and parenting provides the overwhelming evidence of a gap in social and educational theory.⁸ What is practical tends to be directed to a common sense view of communal life and ‘what will work’. The ground of practical decisions is the dynamics of the person functioning within the context of explanation. Statistical studies, both qualitative and quantitative, presently ‘perform’ as theoretic enterprises. The explanatory component is absent. This absence leaves statistical research functioning within the common sense domain. It is within this context that the need for a proper theory of parenting emerges. I turn now towards a first part of the solution towards the development of a theory of parenting.

The first part of that solution is discovering what the data of a proper theory of parenting is. That data is the interiority of the human subject. In terms of researchers and teachers it is the data brought to light by their own turn to their own experience of conscious activity. This activity relates back to my former articles on “How to grow a Child” and “Parents Becoming Better Parents: Strategies of Self-Development”. It might begin with the question ‘What am I?’ and the experience is slowly illuminated by becoming aware of one's own inner functioning. In the writings of Bernard Lonergan, he offers the notion that you and I are unrestricted desires for understanding. We are also a desire to be loved and understood. The awareness of these natural dynamics is

⁶ See Terry Arendell, (ed.) *Contemporary Parenting: Challenges and Issues*, Sage Pub., 1997. See esp. "An Agenda for Family Policy in the United States". See also Jack Westman, (ed.) *Parenthood in America: Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Siege*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

⁷ B. Lonergan, *Collection*, Palm Pub., Montreal, 1967, p. 116. See also Fred Lawrence's "Political Theology and *The Longer Cycle of Decline*", *Lonergan Workshop*, Vol. 1, ed by Fred Lawrence, Scholars Press, Montana, 1978, p. 240 for a discussion of the problem of political and ethical collaboration within the context of Lonergan's insight into the problem of theory and practice.

⁸ Combine this analysis with the lack of success of contemporary solutions and growing breakdown of communal relationships as an outgrowth of cultural decline and the need intensifies for a new method of empirical research—a turn to the subject and a division of labour to handle the complexity of the solution.

acknowledged by adverting to that experience within ourselves. Are you such a desire or are you not such a desire? The acknowledging of the experience is a beginning. To come to some understanding of this natural dynamic is to push forward towards some insight into the experience. To verify your insight is to ask; 'Is it so?' I offer the following list of these elements that go on within you and me.

1. Experience(data)
2. What is it?(Question)
3. Insight
4. Conclusion
5. Is it so? (Am I correct?)
6. Indirect insight
7. Judgment(Verification)
8. What to do?
9. Insight
10. Options
11. Insight
12. Decision
13. Is it to be done?

These 13 elements go on within the human consciousness of people. These activities express the human desire to understand correctly.⁹ They manifest the interior functioning of a person. They also manifest the functioning of a scientist, social or natural. They constitute a cross cultural, cross gender, cross age foundation for the study of human beings. They are the data of social science and for our purposes the data of parenting. The numerous texts and research studies on parenting and family studies do not advert or acknowledge these activities¹⁰. This constitutes the gap in contemporary

⁹ Theory is always subject to revision. Our desire is for correct understanding but that is difficult to achieve if at all. The 13 elements are foundational experientially and our understanding of them is open for revision, but the process of revision utilizes the 13 elements.

¹⁰ Check the indices of texts on parenting and child studies for question. Also reflect on whether such texts draw you into reflection on your own interior life in a systematic fashion.

theories of parenting, be they Adlerian, behavioural, developmental, experimental or systems perspective.

If this desire for understanding is manifested and objectified through the functioning of these 13 elements, then they are a manifestation of what it is to be a human being.¹¹ A development in understanding of these elements and their functioning within human life would offer a beginning for a proper theory of how to grow children, how to parent children, and how to continue to grow ourselves.¹² The manifestation and awareness of our inner dynamics is a slow and difficult process especially in our times when the turn to the subject is frustrated by restricted and mistaken views on objectivity and empiricism.¹³ Because this turn to the subject is such a difficult shift in the contemporary common sense understanding of theory it is slow in emerging as verified data of the social sciences. An example serves to highlight the datum. If we are studying tolerance we require the datum of being tolerant. How is this done? The researcher cannot 'see' tolerance in another person. One may experience a reaction by another person and recognize that he or she is being tolerant.¹⁴ But the actual data of tolerance is the researcher's own experience of tolerance.¹⁵ What is going on in you when you are being tolerant? At first this activity is descriptive. In order to move into the theoretic realm the researcher moves to an explanation of the experience of tolerance which involves relating the experience to its motivation and outcome. It also involves explaining the functional activity of an experience to other experiences¹⁶. It is within the context of this form of reflection that the researcher is functioning in the world of theory.

The difficulty and gradual emergence of this inner reflection generates an appreciation for authenticity that is concrete, empirical. Because this authenticity is always potentially developing there is the need for a method that continues to 'recycle' our reflective efforts.¹⁷ Our authenticity is always precarious. There is a sense in which

¹¹ *Insight*, ch. 11 on Self-Affirmation of the Knower.

¹² *A Brief History of Tongue*, Axial Press, Halifax, 2000. Prologue, "General Method" where McShane cajoles the reader towards self-reflection concomitant with the difficulty in this science.

¹³ *Insight*, Ch. 13. See also my former articles on the website noted in this paper's introduction.

¹⁴ What are their motivations? Can you see their motivations?

¹⁵ Are you aware of your own motivations for being tolerant?

¹⁶ This is more obvious in physics and chemistry than in the social sciences.

¹⁷ Philip McShane, "Reinventing History" www.philipmcschane.ca for a discussion of the structure of our recycling of our 'inauthenticity'.

our authenticity is always an expression of our inauthenticity. In other words, even in our self-ignorance and psychic disturbances, we express our inadequacy and disturbances quite authentically but unknowingly. So there is the need to have at our disposal, especially in the social sciences, a method that offers not only collaboration due to the multi-task nature of contemporary parenting, but also a method that continues to cajole the researcher towards a deeper existential understanding of him or herself. This method is the process of functional specialization.¹⁸ We now turn to that part of an exposition towards a proper theory of parenting.

The method of functional specialization operates in two phases. The first phase is a reflection on the past in an attempt to bring forward what has been done or accomplished. So, again, if a researcher is interested in tolerance and how it relates to parenting there is required a reflection on one's past or present experience of tolerance in order to provide data for the development of foundations in a theory of parenting. In doing so four specialties are operative. Data on tolerance is gathered in research. The experiences gathered are interpreted. The various interpretations of tolerance are formulated in texts. Others seek to discern which interpretations offer intelligent explanations of tolerance. These four specialties are named Research, Interpretation, History and Dialectics. These four specialties constitute the first phase of functional specialization.

The second phase of functional specialization is oriented towards the future.¹⁹ It does so by seeking foundations, policies, systematic understanding and communication. So, out of the first phase theories of tolerance may be brought forward that intelligence discerns to offer progress in the field of researching parenting. Out of these theories one discerns certain policies about theories of parenting. Systematics attempts to explain these policies. Communications develops ways of communicating these understandings to various audiences either in texts or teaching.

¹⁸ *Method in Theology*, ch. 5 on Functional Specialties.

¹⁹ Planning a trip is a good example of helping in our understanding of these phases. We reflect on past trips in order to have better trips in the future.

But this is not the completion of this method. These acts of expression, of communication, again become data for research.²⁰ The entire process begins again. It is a cumulative recycling of work in progress. Because of the immense data and resources of collecting data in our age it is necessary that tasks and functions be divided. It not only allows for efficiency but also inspires the various researchers towards their own talent. One may be quite apt at gathering data while others may have well-developed skills of interpretation, etc. The method functions interdependently. Each specialty relies on the results of the others and the recycling dynamic of the method continues to oscillate towards better results.

A further characteristic of functional specialization is to be acknowledged. These 8 specialties are grounded in the 13 elements of consciousness that I outlined above. So the level of experience or attentiveness is expressed in the activity of gathering data. One has some idea of what data is required in order to carry out a particular study. The researcher does not just utilize his or her act of being attentive, but also is intelligent and will ask questions; 'What materials are required for this study? And insights and judgments will follow. In other words, all 8 specialists are operating attentively, intelligently, reasonably and responsibly. But each specialty expresses explicitly a particular level of conscious activity. A diagram will help correlate the various correspondences.

FIRST PHASE (Past)

Decision-Dialectic

Judging-History

Understanding-Interpretation

Experiencing-Research

SECOND PHASE (Future)

Foundations-Decision

Policies-Judging

Systematics-Understanding

Communications-Experience

Each level of consciousness corresponds to one specialty in each phase. Functional specialization provides not only the cumulative ongoing development of a particular field of study but also provides a process for the ongoing recycling of self-discovery. Let us say our research is focused again on tolerance. Our own self-knowledge of tolerance is continually recycled through the eight functional specialties increasing our

²⁰ See Philip McShane's chapter 8 "Research" www.philipmcshane.ca on the relationship between communications and research.

knowledge of our own tolerance and that of others providing a foundation for developing policies on how to develop our own tolerance, on the role of tolerance in relationships, and the role of tolerance in parenting. The context in this sense is not just the environment 'out there' but more importantly the environment that is you and I. This shifts the emphasis or role of statistical studies in scientific research. Statistics can within the context of self-reflection, ground itself in the concrete-the actual data of tolerance. In that manner statistics then contributes to the explanatory account of tolerance rather than offer the numbered occurrence of an event at a 'distance'. By 'distance' I mean that the statistical researcher will be dealing with occurrences that are explicitly connected to the experience of tolerance.

The question of objectivity should have emerged in my reader's mind by now. Whether one is reflecting on numbers on a page or one's experience of tolerance, it is the researcher who is reflecting. Objectivity is the objectification of one's subjectivity-the conscious movement from What questions (explanation) to Is questions (verification). How does the researcher know when he or she is correct? The researcher knows he or she is correct when their insight is verified as a response to the Is-question-Is the explanation of tolerance that I have arrived at correct? If the researcher continues to advert to experience to verify, he or she is still merely experiencing. The human subjective component, the acts of consciousness, directs itself towards an objectification of the content of consciousness-towards a verification of the content of one's questions, one's insights, and one's judgments.

The shift in the notion of empiricism that I am attempting to explain in this brief article is a shift in our notion of knowing and the real. It is a move away, or beyond the naive realism that dominates, logical positivism, statistical studies, or post modernism. Post modernism speaks of contexts. The context of even the post modernist is the post modernist her or himself. It is the subject experiencing, asking questions, getting insights and formulating judgments. One's understanding is one's context be it of one's culture or of oneself. In a reflective manner it is the researcher experiencing one's own acts of experiencing, of questioning, of understanding, and of judging. It is to advert to these

personal experiences and more. It is to existentially ask: How do I²¹ know? and What do I know when I am knowing? It is to this shift in self-awareness and self-knowledge that will eventually lay the groundwork towards a proper theory of parenting. Is there something in me that is common to the entire human race? If not, then there is no such thing as theory, science, teaching, learning, growth, or development. The universe and our existence are absurd. Contemporary theories of science and the lack of self-reflection²² in contemporary society and the university contribute unknowingly to the survival of such absurdity.²³

²¹ Recently I attended lectures at the University of British Columbia on the “Crisis of Culture” by Dr. Philip McShane. The theme oscillated about the researcher’s presence to oneself through reflection on what is meant by “I”. What do we mean when we say “I”? The implication is that we may mean very little by “I” in a culture dedicated to somnambulism, and the unexamined life. The challenge is to reflect on what you mean by “I” and can you speak on the topic for 10 hours without repeating yourself?

²² It is perhaps worth recalling Socrates’ comment; “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

²³ There is the ever-present manifestation of questioning of every child as a hopeful and dominant cross-cultural activity in human living. There is even the hope of inroads brought on by the interest of students. I am thinking of John Benton’s recent accomplishment of responding to a High school student wondering why philosophy was not taught in high school. Benton, along with authors Philip McShane and Alexandra Drage, in a few months, managed to put together a text just for this purpose. The administration of the school has authorized the course and Benton begins in September of this year with approximately 50 students. The text is *Critical Thinking*, Axial Press, Halifax, 2005. It is an attempt to introduce the high school student to themselves, to critical thinking, through a variety of sciences and arts.